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SANDRA PETRONIO, NAOMI ELLEMERS, HOWARD GILES and CYNTHIA GALLOIS

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SANDRA PETRONIO
NAOMI ELLEMERS
HOWARD GILES
CYNTHIA GALLOIS

(Mis)communicating Across Boundaries

Interpersonal and Intergroup Considerations

The metaphor of boundary is ubiquitous and has guided much research on interpersonal and intergroup communication. This article explores the metaphor by reviewing the literature on boundaries with a focus on miscommunication and problematic talk. In particular, the tensions around privacy and self-disclosure, and rules about family communication are good examples of communication and miscommunication across interpersonal boundaries. In the intergroup arena, the negotiation of boundaries implicates the sociostructural relations between groups and the choices individuals make based on the identities that are salient to them in a given context. We argue that miscommunication can best be conceived of as an indicator of tension in negotiating boundaries as they emerge and change in interaction.

The metaphor of boundaries is all around us. Boundaries mark school districts, property lines, cities, states, relationships, and jobs. Children even understand the rudimentary form of boundaries when they draw invisible lines in the playground as they mark their territory, or in the car when they show on which side of the line their brothers or sisters should sit during a ride. A baseball is out of bounds, parents tell their children they have stepped over the line, and marital couples talk about strengthening their bonds.

This special issue on “(Mis)communicating Across Boundaries” is devoted to exploring this metaphor in a number of selected domains.¹ Herein, we find a diversity of articles—methodologically, theoretically, and empirically—that explore (across a range of social contexts) the variable ways in

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which boundary lines are: drawn communicatively (Dollar & Zimmers, 1998 [this issue]); regulated in discourse (Wilson, Roloff, & Carey, 1998 [this issue]), misinterpreted (Mulac et al., 1998 [this issue]), evaluated (Coover & Godbold, 1998 [this issue]), and transcended or accentuated (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998 [this issue]). We cannot in one issue—let alone in a single article—reflect on all the complex ways in which changing boundary parameters are communicated to others, creatively sustained and dissolved, and misinterpreted and misunderstood. Hence, in this introductory article, our aim is to examine the boundary metaphor and provide a new synthesis of its use in many fields of communication. We will explore the ways in which people negotiate the maintenance and blurring of interpersonal boundaries, including related issues of privacy and self-disclosure. Then, we will consider the superficially more apparent case of the negotiation of intergroup boundaries and the crucial role played by social categorization and social identity in this process. Finally, we will use the model of miscommunication proposed by Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles (1991) to propose that miscommunication always involves boundary negotiation. Looked at in this way, miscommunication is always about self-definition as a social being. The other articles in this special issue develop this point in a number of contexts.

The Boundary Metaphor

Many scholars have used the boundary metaphor, and the cross-disciplinary dependence on boundaries has produced a variety of applications. Some scholars frame the use of boundaries in terms of ingroup/outgroup issues. The use of this metaphor is broader than that, however. Indeed, scholars depend on boundaries to show the ways in which territories are drawn, borders are created, limits are set, and lines of demarcation are established. Yet boundaries also evoke ideas about bridging, spanning, access, and integration. The concepts of balance and optimality are embedded in many theories about boundaries. Regulating, managing, blurring, and coping with fuzzy boundaries are themes often found with a boundary metaphor (Coupland et al., 1991; Petronio, in press).

Balancing this polarity bespeaks a tension. The forces separating groups, relationships, the media, politicians on an issue, religious ideologies, moral and ethical problems, and physicians on a treatment for an illness may also pull toward integration. In most cases, people face a range of choices that, by degree, allow them to work harmoniously with others or to take a stand that defines their boundaries on an issue. They can choose to remain separate within their borders or to engage in communication to find common ground with others. Sometimes it is in their best interests to stay within the confines

of their ideological, relational, task, or privacy boundaries, disconnected from others, whereas at other times their interests push them to transcend the forces of separation and link with others.

Whenever people are presented with these opposing tensions to remain apart or join together, the balance of boundary maintenance is apparent. For example, the media may attack President Clinton for not having an effective foreign policy. The president counterattacks by blaming the media for poor reporting of the "facts." Each attack functions as a means of separating one group or philosophical position from the other. In line with boundary theory, people on each side have formed boundary walls around their respective points of view. Continued separation may lead to further attacks. However, it is also likely that, through communication, the boundaries may become more permeable (at least on certain issues), and linkages may be formed to relax the density of boundary walls. In other words, negotiations may take place to resolve the conflict and lessen the attacks.

Boundary Fit and Misfit

Boundaries help the individual to fit into his or her environment through affording some mastery over how the borders work (see Welchman, 1996). Consequently, the metaphor of boundaries transcends any particular domain (e.g., relationships, groups, privacy, media, the law, and medicine) and is a more general utilitarian concept. We fit in our environment by drawing lines around those things that are important to us, and we control them through rules. Yet we also recognize that to fit within the environment successfully, we must have enough flexibility in these boundaries to allow a degree of integration between ourselves and the world in which we live.

In a sense, Lewinian field theory (1951)—and subsequent work on person-environment fit (French, Rogers, & Cobb, 1974)—contribute to the discussion of how boundaries work. The Latin roots of the word *boundary* refer to a field with limits (Rosenblatt, 1994). The way people adapt to their social environment—that is, interface with others—depends on a certain fit. There are particular demands from the environment that may be met with varying degrees of ability by the person. These demands generally concern the need to open boundaries. Spouses may want their partners to disclose feelings, organizations may want one task team to work with another, or a political group may want another group to compromise. Spouses, task teams, and political groups respond to these boundary demands to the best of their abilities, although their responses are guided by the extent to which they are motivated to meet these demands. Within a social environment, people desire both to retain a level of autonomy from others and to find satisfying

connections, so that the motivation to fulfill the boundary demands of others has to meet some need for the individual. The fit between boundary demands and motivations is better accomplished if people feel that they have some control over their associations with their environment. Thus, people establish rules for how they will let others into their boundaries, or keep them separate. They determine when, if, and under what conditions their boundaries will link up with someone else's. In this way, people blend their world with others, but the degree of integration depends on negotiating a boundary fit.

It is easy to find examples of boundary fit. For instance, in a case study of Amish women operating a business, Hawley (1995) found that the women had to fulfill the religious philosophy of maintaining cultural separateness while still succeeding in the business community. The boundary fit between cultural segregation and the requirements that allow a business to flourish may appear miles apart, but this research shows how these boundaries are managed to meet the demands and needs of the individuals involved. Likewise, a study examining the impact of the Internet on spanning the diverse boundaries found in religious beliefs illustrates how cyberspace can be instrumental in negotiating borders in ways that are inaccessible by other means of communication (Kinney, 1995; see also Postmes et al., 1998).

The largest body of research commensurate with the notion of boundary fit depends on a systems perspective (Altman, 1975; Euske & Roberts, 1987; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Petronio, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1994). Whereas systems theory argues for interdependability among the elements internal to the system, being opened or closed to the environment, a hierarchical nature, subsystems, homeostasis or self-regulation, and equifinality, translating these ideas into a boundary metaphor has been productive. For example, Huber and Daft (1987) presented an excellent depiction of the way information environments function within organizations. Their discussion about organizational boundaries emphasized boundary spanning through message routing and summarizing. Boundary spanning is a process that relies on certain groups to bring information across departments or task groups. Individuals whose position it is to span boundaries may be influenced by the ability to experience different orientations. In a study on ethical subclimates within an organization, employees in boundary spanning departments (interfacing with many different people in the organization) showed a preference toward a cosmopolitan perspective and principled ethical reasoning (Weber, 1995).

Because there are large amounts of information, message routing and summarizing are used to reduce the information processing load and may

work to keep boundaries restricted. Routing limits the number of departments or units in the organization that receive messages (Huber & Daft, 1987). Information is selectively distributed, which curtails the amount of processing needed throughout the organization. For example, in a university setting, information about grant opportunities may be routed only to faculty members, bypassing department chairs and students, which reduces the sheer volume of information the chairs and students receive. The units in upper administration responsible for grant funding may see little need to distribute information to everyone. It may turn out, however, that department chairs need to negotiate with faculty members who are submitting grants, but may be unaware of the grant parameters until the faculty member completes writing the application. In some cases, the chair may need to commit departmental funds, which may already have been spent elsewhere. As this example shows, keeping information from certain departments or groups may be functional for organizations in some ways, but routing may also mark the borders between groups in ways that reduce effective functioning of the system.

Whereas message routing may increase or decrease boundary permeability, message summarizing synthesizes a large amount of information so that it can be easily distributed across the boundaries of an organization (Huber & Daft, 1987). In this way, boundary spanning takes place, and people within organizations make connections across borders. Huber and Daft (1987) point out that “organizations purposefully acquire and internally disseminate information to carry out the critical functions of decision making and control” (p. 146). Thus, through an examination of routing and summarizing, the way boundaries are managed within organizations becomes evident.

Organizational boundaries may also be regulated through physical or structural accessibility (Bacharach & Aiken, 1977). Research has shown that when the physical or structural environment provides open access, subordinates are more likely to communicate with superiors (Conrath, 1973). For example, communication among coworkers may be more likely when walls to offices are removed and cubicles are used. When physical boundaries are removed, however, social boundaries may emerge in their place. In offices without walls, people may develop stricter rules for access to their supplies and participation in conversations with coworkers. When there are no obvious physical barriers such as doors, people invent their own lines of separation. When borders are more flexible, conditions are right for boundary

spanning from one level to the next, whereas if boundaries are tightly drawn, boundary spanning may be more difficult and control more obvious.

Negotiation of Interpersonal Boundaries

Maintaining boundary control has often been observed in research on bona fide groups. Putnam and Stohl (1990) argued that

boundary communication for small group interaction highlights the network studies on patterns of interaction between and within groups, links between boundary-spanning activities and group process, and the relative effectiveness of groups with different types of external linkages and internal dynamics. (p. 253)

Within bona fide groups, Putnam and Stohl pointed out that boundaries serve an important function in that they often set the conditions for group identity. In defining the nature of boundaries, these authors contend that boundaries should be considered stable yet permeable. This tension between giving structure while accepting the nature of change is an important component in a workable notion of boundary. Putnam and Stohl (1990) illustrated the energy that results from the tension by suggesting that "boundaries, then, as created by member communication inside and outside the group, are simultaneously the life-sustaining element and a potential factor in the group's demise" (p. 257). The group's endurance depends on managing the tension that produces boundary fit. Thus, the members become aware of the need both for permeability and for limits to accessibility.

Research on communication in families also relies on a boundary metaphor to represent the manner in which families regulate member interaction and communication with those outside the family (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Minuchin, 1984; Petronio, 1991; Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Mon't Ros-Mendoza, 1996; Ryder & Bartle, 1991). Families manage the tensions of boundary maintenance in several consistent ways. First, because families have multiple boundaries around subsystems, an interface between those boundaries is needed (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). For example, there are boundaries around the subsystems of mother and father, sibling relationships, grandparents, and father and daughter. The flow of information through the interface provides common ground for members to exchange their views and air their disputes, and such exchanges are managed through communication rules (Minuchin, 1984), which determine when, to whom, where, and under what conditions members interact.

Privacy

The ideas about boundaries conveyed in the family communication literature inform issues of privacy. Altman (1975) states that

privacy is conceived of as an interpersonal boundary process by which a person or group regulates interaction with others. By altering the degree of openness of the self to others, a hypothetical personal boundary is more or less receptive to social interaction with others. Privacy is, therefore, a dynamic process involving selective control over a self-boundary, either by an individual or group. (p. 7)

Thus, privacy is based on a regulatory process that opens and closes boundaries around the self to control the degree of contact made with others. Individuals have certain levels of desired (ideal) privacy, which rely on boundary control mechanisms, ultimately leading to the privacy that is feasibly achieved. For example, a person may wish to be left alone (not touched or talked to), but may be traveling on a crowded subway. Ignoring the crowds may be somewhat possible; but the person still has to work at deflecting unwanted verbal and nonverbal messages.

For Altman, boundary control allows a person to manage the tensions between being social and being alone. He argues that although a balance is preferable, imbalances nevertheless occur. People may slam doors or put signs up on their front lawns telling others to stay out, but the desire for exclusion may be interpreted more strongly than the individual intended. Weighing the desired against the achieved helps to adjust the tension of boundary maintenance. Altman's proposal, although meant to focus on all types of privacy, contributes to a foundation for the theory of communication boundary management (Petronio, 1991).

Self-Disclosure

Communication boundary management is a theory that explains private disclosures. Using the notion of a metaphoric boundary, this theory assumes that people feel they own their private disclosures. As such, they have a right to control who knows the information. As scholars in the area of family interaction also maintain, this theory posits that rules for opening up the boundaries (in this case, around private information) are established to regulate how much others know about the person. In essence, the rules help manage the boundary and, therefore, the accessibility of the private information to

others. The theory suggests that boundaries may be regulated by these rules along a continuum from being tightly to loosely controlled; in addition, the rules may be routinized. In other words, people use established rules for balancing privacy and disclosure that have been in effect for so long that they are enacted as a matter of practice. For example, if someone asks about a person's salary, an immediate response might be, "Gee, I'm sorry, but I never tell people what I make." Without giving it much thought, the person states the rule for disclosing information that he or she believes is private. Rules may also be triggered by the context: In novel situations, rules are established to fulfill a disclosure need. For example, recently divorced people often change or make up new rules for regulating the boundary around private information to their divorced spouse because they can no longer follow the same rules for confiding in the ex-spouse. Using both routinized and triggered rules, the tension between opening and closing a boundary around private information is managed.

In recent research, boundary access and protection rules have been identified for sexually abused children (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997; Petronio et al., 1996). These children disclose about sexual abuse when people use indirect messages that grant permission to talk about this crime. They also use boundary access rules that determine which setting is selected for disclosure to take place. For example, situations involving mundane activities like washing dishes or watching television appear to be attractive circumstances in which to disclose. In addition, children depend on incremental disclosure as an access rule: They give a preview or hint at the problem and assess the confidant's reply. If the recipient of the preview statement reacts responsively, the child is more likely to make a full disclosure about the abuse. Children also employ protection rules in deciding that disclosure is not in their best interests.

Determining access and protection rules, in general, relies on a number of factors, such as anticipating the ramifications of the disclosure of private information (Petronio & Martin, 1986). In many cases, regulating boundaries using these rules rests on coordinating boundaries with confidants. There are many kinds of boundaries around private information that represent levels of relationships individuals have with others (Petronio, *in press*). Hence, individuals may have personal boundaries around private information they own: Through disclosure, part of the personal boundary evolves into dyadic boundaries. Sharing private information means that the discloser and confidant co-own the revelation, because both are responsible for the management of this information. People typically own several levels of boundaries (Petronio, *in press*). Besides personal and dyadic, individuals may co-own private information forming group boundaries, family boundaries,

organizational boundaries, and community boundaries around the shared revelations. People manage boundaries on each level, so that sometimes one boundary may become more salient, and the linkages take center stage over the other boundaries. For example, boundaries around shared private information for marital couples may need more protection than organizationally private information. The way individuals fit their personal boundary needs with other boundaries they coregulate may be significant in a host of relational issues, such as managing conflict.

The article by Wilson et al. (1998) on boundary rules that inhibit expressing concern about someone else's romantic relationship highlights the importance the rules play in boundary regulation. These authors argue that rules restrict the ability of individuals to express their concerns about negative behaviors of a friend's romantic partner, thereby establishing the groundwork to possible miscommunication later. Not directly expressing one's feelings can be misunderstood and lead to problems for the friendship. This article directs our attention to the difficulties we sometimes have linking with others, especially if our rules for disclosure about risky information make it difficult to let others know how we feel.

Boundary Coordination and Miscommunication

As these examples illustrate, the boundary metaphor has use in creating images of relationships and a sense of coordination. Traversing the boundaries of interaction is a dynamic process that depends on managing the tension between integration and separation. Through consideration of how people coordinate their boundaries, the initiation and termination of relationships among individuals may be charted. Boundaries emerge to balance the tension between being autonomous and being social. The development of boundaries helps to maintain this tension in a productive fashion. When the boundaries are not maintained, miscommunication may be the result (Coupland et al., 1991). These scholars argued that "communicative interchange becomes a foregrounded rather than a taken-for-granted process more frequently when we recognize its inefficiencies and its unforeseen or undesirable consequences" (p. 3). They noted, however, that although miscommunication may be problematic from the simple to the extreme, focusing on it may positively contribute to a better understanding of social relationships. This philosophy is well founded when considering the negotiation of boundaries.

Boundaries are not always kept in place. Sometimes people tighten the walls too much, and sometimes they allow too much permeability. When the walls are held too tightly, people may miscommunicate because they are not

receptive to another person's definition of an event. For example, take the person who knows he or she is right about a religious belief. Sometimes being right translates into building thick boundary walls to preserve the belief. Another person offers a contradictory opinion, but the opinion may not be heard because the walls block out the communication. When the boundaries are too permeable, on the other hand, miscommunication may also be evident. For example, if spouses' boundaries interface too much with their partners' boundaries, it may be difficult for them to discern and express independent points of view. Although high degrees of integration may seem positive, individual identities in a marriage may get lost. Minuchin (1984) argued that this creates an unbalanced system, and eventually, members may resent the lack of separateness. Sometimes identities also get lost in family roles. For example, a friend of one of us used to complain that she was only "mommy" and "honey," that her family defined her only in those boundary terms. The use of these labels alone, especially by her husband (who never used her first name), made her identity as a person somehow invisible.

The example above is at one level a clear illustration of a miscommunication about interpersonal boundaries: a husband who deals with his wife in terms that are too role related for her liking and sense of personal identity. At another level, however, this example points to the nexus between interpersonal and intergroup boundaries, as the husband is treating his wife as a member of a social outgroup, instead of treating her fully as an individual (which is what she wants). The choice between social categorization and individuation is at the heart of the negotiation of intergroup boundaries, which is explored in the next section.

Negotiation of Intergroup Boundaries

Group boundaries play a central role in everyday understanding, as well as in the scientific study of social perception and social behavior. Theorists and researchers in this area have questioned the ways in which group boundaries are drawn and communicated, how this may result in social conflict, and how group boundaries can be overcome for purposes of mediation or conflict resolution. Consequently, the boundary metaphor has acquired positive as well as negative connotations, in the sense that some researchers have emphasized the functional nature of group boundaries for social perception, social identification, and well-being, whereas others have focused on the harmful consequences of communicating social boundaries when this entails social exclusion or elicits intergroup conflict.

The powerful effects that social boundaries may have on interpersonal interaction are easily illustrated. For instance, one of the most dramatic

consequences of the interethnic dispute in the former Yugoslavia was that people from the same community suddenly saw themselves and each other primarily as members of different ethnic groups. The sudden aggressiveness of the behavior of former friends, colleagues, neighbors, and even spouses underlines the forceful implications that group boundaries may have. For outsiders (in this case, the international community), such stark evidence that social boundaries may render even established interpersonal relations meaningless seems incomprehensible.

Social Categorization and Intergroup Boundaries

When we take a closer look at the implications group boundaries have for social perception and social behavior, it is important to note that, although everyone belongs to various social groups (some of which we are born into), this does not imply that group memberships are fixed or that group boundaries are invariant. Instead, some groups are formed while others fall apart (Worchel, Coutant-Sassic, & Grossman, 1992), and new group boundaries are drawn and old ones dissolve. Overall, there is an ongoing flux of individuals across groups (Moreland & Levine, 1982). As a result, people find themselves continually redefining and crossing boundaries, for example, because their present group appears unattractive and they aspire to membership in a more appealing or prestigious group (as may be the case for immigrants across ethnic groups; see Ethier & Deaux, 1994). People may be forced to renegotiate group boundaries, for example, because they are faced with the threat of layoffs in work organizations. The flexible use of group boundaries has been more explicitly addressed in research on cross-categorization (Vanbeselaere, 1991; but see also Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995), subtyping (Weber & Crocker, 1983), and superordinate categorization (Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989). This research has yielded converging evidence that the same people may define themselves and others in terms of different group memberships, depending on the interdependence structure they find themselves in or on the salient comparative context (Doise, Deschamps, & Meyers, 1978; Haslam, Oakes, McGarty, Turner, & Onorato, 1995; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978).

Although this evidence testifies to the functionality and adaptive use of category boundaries, the flexible character of social categories may also give rise to problems of miscommunication. If, for instance, social actors who participate in the same interaction differ with respect to the social context that is salient for them, they may perceive and define a seemingly common reality in fundamentally different ways. Consider a situation where a person is asked to comment on a particular occurrence. This person may be convinced that

she has been approached because of her professional expertise in this matter (i.e., because of her professional group membership), whereas the other party may primarily be interested in interacting with the person because of her attractiveness as a woman (indicating a salient gender categorization). Recent research has revealed that such occurrences may not only result in communicative problems, but that being approached in terms of one's gender in a professional situation may undermine the self-esteem of the woman involved (Satterfield & Muehlenhard, 1997).

Categorization and Accentuation

Nevertheless, in a dynamic and constantly changing social environment these social boundaries are crucial, as they enable people to structure and organize the social world and to define and communicate their own position in it. In fact, although later developments have emphasized the strategic and communicative aspects of intergroup perceptions and behaviors, work in this area was originally influenced by research on perceptual effects in the cognitive categorization of physical stimuli. A seminal study on categorical perception by Tajfel and Wilkes (1963) demonstrated that the estimated length of identical lines differed, depending on whether they were presented as a continuous set of stimuli or as two separate groups. When the stimuli could be organized into short and long lines, the continuous increase in length between stimuli that lay at the boundaries of these two categories was turned into a categorical difference. Perceivers emphasized the differences between the categories while they accentuated the within-category similarities.

Through the years, research has consistently shown that similar phenomena affect the perception of social stimuli. Individuals are perceived as interchangeable exemplars when they are classified into the same category, although they are considered to be fundamentally different when separated by a group boundary. For instance, during the World Cup matches, distinctions between individual soccer players from different teams, which are highly salient at home, become less relevant when the players jointly represent their country. Such psychological drawing together of people into different groups is further enhanced when the distinctiveness or the value of a group is threatened and people identify strongly with that group (see Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Mlicki & Ellemers, 1996; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997), with war as an extreme example. In fact, national governments or political parties may be led to emphasize or even stage such external threats to strengthen group ties, as has been uncannily illustrated with the recent movie, *Wag the Dog*.

The principle of cognitive accentuation, also called the metacontrast ratio, plays a central role in recent theory on self-categorization (see Turner, 1987). This theoretical framework addresses how properties of the social context may affect the salience of a particular categorization by demonstrating that a specific category may be used to structure the situation when the category is cognitively accessible and offers a good structural or normative fit for the social stimuli under consideration (Oakes, 1987). This argument assumes that the cognitive organization of individuals into meaningful categories is a functional strategy for the processing of complex social information (see also McGarty & Turner, 1992).

More important for our present purposes is that people not only use social categories as perceivers, but also as social actors. People need to belong to social groups to establish a feeling of self-worth and identity (see Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998), whereas social exclusion can lead to self-devaluation (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997). Accordingly, the drawing of group boundaries to define the social structure, as well as their own position in it, leads people to display behavior that fits the norms for the ingroup (e.g., Reicher & Levine, 1993) to enact these social boundaries and communicate their social identity to others. Empirical research has demonstrated the general principle that people tend to express relatively extreme attitudes when this serves to present themselves as members of a particular group or to set themselves apart from another group (see Mackie, 1986; Mackie & Cooper, 1984; Turner, Wetherell, & Hogg, 1989; Wetherell, 1987). For instance, Boyanowsky and Allen (1973) found that the responses of highly prejudiced European American subjects were not affected by contrary beliefs expressed by an African American confederate, although they did adapt their attitudes when the same opinions were expressed by a member of their ethnic ingroup. This phenomenon illustrates the communicative functions of social behavior, as well as the possible implications of category boundaries for self-definition, when people display prototypical group behavior (including language use, but also dress codes, hairstyles, and manners) to indicate to which group they (want to) belong.

The Language of Intergroup Boundaries

Language use is a preeminent form of behavior that is used to communicate one's preferred social identity (Cargile, Giles, & Clément, 1996). The article on social identity examining young adult street speakers by Dollar and Zimmers (1998) formulates boundaries that are used to differentiate youth on the street and parents, legislators, and community members. This research identifies boundary lines that are used to challenge the more powerful

speakers adhering to traditional views toward the "houseless." By examining the linguistic strategies, these authors offer insights into how miscommunication is a function of boundaries that are held too tightly on both sides. By articulating the linkages between the youth street speakers and the opposing forces of parents and legislators, the article illustrates the way the latter blocks attempts by the youth to change the views of these other groups.

The relationship between boundaries and language use can occur, however, in even more subtle ways (see Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). For instance, content analysis of mass communications relating to political or athletic events (Maass, Corvino, & Arcuri, 1994) has revealed that journalists rely more on abstract terms when describing events that reflect positively on the party or team they sympathize with, whereas concrete terms are used to convey the more transitory nature of negative events associated with this group. In a similar vein, those who attempt to pass from one social group to another may strategically adapt, or accommodate, their communicative behavior (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995; Giles, 1978), depending on the social context in which they find themselves and the behavioral sanctions they expect from the audience (see Barreto & Ellemers, 1997; Ellemers, Van Dyck, Jacobs, & Hinkle, 1998).

Relevant here is an approach to the social psychology of bilingualism and ethnolinguistics which invokes the notion of subjective ethnic group boundaries as one of its central constructs (see Giles, 1979). For instance, the intergroup model of second language learning and language maintenance (see Giles & Byrne, 1982; Giles, Leets, & Coupland, 1990) proposes that when minority group members who value their ethnicity highly feel that their cultural boundaries are hard (e.g., the belief not easy for an outgroup member to pass as an ingroup member communicatively or psychologically) they are less likely than those endorsing soft boundaries to report speaking the dominant (or host) group's language or dialect with native-like proficiency (see Clachar, 1997; Leets & Giles, 1995). Similarly, research derived from ethnolinguistic identity (e.g., Giles, 1979; Hildebrandt & Giles, 1983) shows that subordinate ethnic individuals who feel their cultural boundaries are hard also report being less likely to converge toward speakers of the majority group—even when they have the bilingual skills to accomplish this (see also Giles & Johnson, 1987; Giles & Viladot, 1994). It has also been demonstrated, however, that people may not even be aware of adaptations of their language use, such as whether the systematic preference for relatively abstract or concrete terms to imply the same behavioral instance indicates some enduring trait (*he was helpful to her* for an ingroup member) or constitutes an isolated occurrence (*he pointed to her* for an outgroup member). Nevertheless, their differential use of language to communicate about members of different

groups systematically affects the impressions they evoke in others (Wigboldus, Spears, & Semin, in press).

Apart from the content of the communication, there is a host of other indicators that may be used to infer one's position in a given social structure, such as particular jargon, slang, regional accent, or paralinguistic and nonverbal styles (see Giles & Coupland, 1992; Pittam, 1994). Indeed, a well-established phenomenon in the stereotyping literature is that members of different groups may use similar descriptive terms with different evaluative connotations to describe the same group characteristics (for instance, *stingy* vs. *thrifty*; Peabody, 1968). As a consequence, the choice of linguistic terms enables others to infer with what group they want to align. At the same time, however, it may give rise to problematic communication, such as may occur in international trade because of cross-cultural differences in communication style.

In addition to language use per se, group boundaries may affect social interaction more broadly. It has been established that people tend to respond differently to identical behavior by others, depending on whether they are joined or separated by intergroup boundaries. In his review, Hewstone (1990) proposed that group-serving biases systematically affect interpretations of other people's behavior (see also Ellemers, Van Rijswijk, Bruins, & De Gilder, 1998). As a consequence, conflict resolution is likely to develop differently, depending on whether it takes place within or across group boundaries. Specifically, relational considerations play an important role when a within-group conflict is addressed, whereas the course of the dispute depends more on instrumental considerations when it involves parties on opposite sides of group boundaries (Tyler, Lind, Ohbuchi, Sugawara, & Huo, 1998).

This latter kind of negotiation is particularly interesting, as it is likely to involve group representatives who are given the task of communicating across group boundaries. Whereas this may elicit stress and role conflict, group representatives are often the only ones who communicate with all parties, so that they are also important information gatekeepers. Holmes, Ellard, and Lamm (1986) argued that this gatekeeper role provides the opportunity for error and distortion in communication, which may be used to construe particular images of the groups involved or to justify their own behavior. Evidence that people at the boundaries of different groups are likely to behave differently from others was obtained by Noel, Wann, and Branscombe (1995), who observed that marginal group members are more inclined than core members to derogate the outgroup (see Breakwell, 1983; Foss & Ray, 1996).

In intergroup relations, the boundary metaphor helps us to understand how people interact and communicate with others. As we have shown, group boundaries are created for purposes of information processing as well as self-definition. In other words, people are divided into groups because it helps to structure and infer social information. Furthermore, people may be motivated to delineate group memberships to set themselves apart as an elite group, or to distance themselves from negatively evaluated individuals in the ingroup (the "black sheep effect"; Marques & Paez, 1995). Group boundaries are sustained to the extent that they prove useful and functional, in the sense that group memberships covary with relevant traits and provide the structural and normative fit (Oakes, 1987) that facilitates social information processing. Accentuation of group boundaries is likely to occur if an important identity is threatened, for instance, when people are confronted with a common enemy or have collectively suffered unjust treatment. The article by Postmes et al. (1998) reviews an important program of experimental research which attempts not only to emphasize that computer mediated communication can actually empower intergroup boundaries (rather than dissolve them as is commonly espoused), but articulates some of the social identity conditions when this comes about. Finally, group boundaries are likely to dissolve if a particular group membership turns out to be unimportant, either because the person's social identity seems better served by membership in a different category, or because interpersonal relations are more informative or important than group characteristics.

Boundaries, Miscommunication, and Problematic Talk

It is clear that miscommunication across boundaries, both interpersonal and intergroup, takes many forms. The model of miscommunication proposed by Coupland et al. (1991) includes six levels. In the light of the work presented above, these levels can be seen to involve different types of boundaries. As such, one can argue that miscommunication is best considered as problematic talk, because it always centers around the negotiation of boundaries. The problem is always one of too rigid boundaries that impede communication, too permeable boundaries that blur social or personal identity in unhelpful ways, or divergence (sometimes motivated) about where or how sharply a boundary should be drawn.

At Level One in the model, discourse and meaning are inherently flawed, although speakers are not likely to recognize the problem. The boundary in this case is at the level of syntax and semantics, and this boundary is, in general, not negotiable by social means. There is a built-in ambiguity and

incompleteness inherent in our message codes, and there are many circumstances where miscommunication at this level occurs undetected. At Level Two, where strategic compromises or minor misunderstandings abound, there may be some awareness of miscommunication. The interactants strive to achieve some baseline of understanding to avoid undue uncertainty, unpleasantness, threat, and confrontation. At this level, where the boundary is more likely to involve pragmatics, boundary fit may be hampered if a baseline understanding is not achieved, but the ramifications for the linkages between boundaries is once again not likely to be problematic. As an example, say that John and Sarah are married and they have discovered a minor problematic conversational routine they enact. When John mentions a event or experience, Sarah often responds by saying, "What?" as he finishes talking. John, being a good husband, repeats the last part of his statement. Sarah again says, "No, what?" Perplexed, John repeats the last part of the sentence louder. Finally, Sarah realizes the problem. She was not really listening to John when he started talking. She said, "What?" meaning, repeat the whole story. When they realize this miscommunication, their interactions across boundaries becomes smoother. These two levels underpin the work presented in this special issue, but they are more commonly dealt with by psycholinguists.

At Level Three, miscommunication is typically attributed to the personal deficiencies of an individual. Blaming characterizes this level of problematic talk. Blaming tends to signal usually an interpersonal rule that blocks boundary fit. When people lash out, they convey the need to maintain a separate boundary from others. In some cases, this attribution seems apt, as in the case of a person lacking a key social skill. For example, people who speak with their eyes shut miss important cues for turn-taking, and as a consequence, often dominate their interactions to the frustration of other speakers. As often as not, however, miscommunication is blamed on another person's deficiencies when another explanation may be more appropriate. The later levels in the model deal with these situations.

Level Four in Coupland et al.'s (1991) model is characteristic of many cases of interpersonal miscommunication. At this level, there is a failure in conversational goal attainment, one of which speakers are likely to be fully aware. Research on communication in families, which we examined earlier, frequently implicates the negotiation of boundaries at this level. The much studied demand-withdraw pattern in marital communication (see Noller, 1993, for a review) is a good example. Numerous studies have found that, in the face of demands by wives to self-disclose or to engage in conflict resolutions, husbands withdraw physically or through the use of verbal strategies

of avoidance, and thus strengthen their personal boundaries against the perceived threat from their wives. Negotiation of boundaries at this level is problematic, because the miscommunication signals a conflict about personal or relationship goals.

At Level Five, intergroup considerations play the major role in miscommunication. This level implicates group and cultural differences in communication norms, which leads to a systematic predisposition to misunderstand (see Gallois & Callan, 1997; Gallois & Giles, 1998). Essentially, the problem here is that group boundaries are too rigid for clear communication to take place, but the differences in rules for verbal and nonverbal behavior may be so subtle that speakers do not realize that there is a problem until conflict has occurred. In this special issue, Mulac et al. deal with this level in their analysis of men's and women's different interpretations of backchannels and questions in conversation. They provide evidence that such misunderstandings are the inevitable consequence of men's and women's different rules about conversation, which has come about because of their different socialization practices (see Maltz & Borker, 1982). Although not all readers may agree with their conclusions, their study provides a neat and precise test of the impact of gender boundaries on cross-gender communication. Such communication is problematic because misunderstandings tend to be interpreted in terms of personal or social motivations, rather than in terms of social rules.

The Sixth and final level in the model deals with sociostructural power imbalances. Miscommunications at this level stem from the historical relations between groups, and in general, serve to enhance the interests of the speaker, either by preserving the status quo or by challenging the position of the more powerful group. More often than not, participants are unaware of the operation of this level and may interpret the situation as personal inadequacy on the part of other speakers (Level Three), interpersonal goal conflict (Level Four), or the consequence of the sociocultural status of group members (Level Five). Frequently, the behaviors involved are very subtle, as in the examples above of the selective use of abstract words to describe positive features of the ingroup and negative features of the outgroup, and concrete words for the opposite. The article by Coover and Godbold in this special issue provides another example. In an interesting demonstration of aversive racism, listeners in their study changed their evaluations of ingroup (European American) and outgroup (African American) speakers, in part, as a function of the speakers' position on an issue. According to the Coupland

et al. (1991) model, it is the task of researchers to do the social analysis necessary to unmask miscommunication about boundaries at this level.

Conclusion

We would like to offer a challenge to researchers: to conduct a thorough analysis of miscommunication in terms of boundary maintenance, negotiation, and shift; and to explore boundaries in terms of the specific kinds of miscommunication they produce. This means getting away from two notions, as we have argued throughout this article. The first is that boundaries can be determined outside the context of an interaction and the identities that emerge within it. They almost never can, because they emerge and change along with the salient features in the context. The second is that miscommunication can be fixed by simple training in social skills or by other individual-based methods. Such training is clearly helpful in some cases, admittedly, but if our argument is correct, this training is not likely to be of much use unless it is accompanied by a clear understanding of the interpersonal, relationship, and intergroup context; its history; and its consequences. The articles in this issue provide additional evidence of ways that the process of communication and miscommunication across boundaries functions in a multitude of contexts. The boundary metaphor, wherever it is applied, helps to articulate the complicated communicative habits of individuals. The contributors to this special issue offer their own views using the boundary metaphor. They aid in the delineation of lines that separate yet join, create linkages yet establish borders, and frame identities that are both unique and dependent on others.

In sum, we trust this special issue will inspire other researchers to adopt and explore the boundary metaphor in their own disparate works—as surely it has untapped theoretical value across a huge range of domains as we have tried to suggest here. In due course, and with a full appreciation of the pitfalls in striving after grandiose frameworks, we nonetheless might emerge with an important theory across the discipline of communication concerning what forms and social functions interpersonal and intergroup boundaries hold; how, when, and why different kinds of boundaries are communicatively created, actively sustained, regulated, and expressed, modified, and dissolved; and what (mis)communicative and social consequences are associated with and shape these processes. Until that time, we encourage scholars to at least locate and determine the impact of the almost inevitable influence of boundary issues and problems in their own communicative concerns.

Note

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